

INTRODUCTION: VICTORIAN OTHER WORLDS

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Victorian Britain's 'other worlds', like our own, were connected to and inspired by the material world of everyday life. The nineteenth-century fascination with alterity of every kind is grounded in its industrial and imperial expansion – perhaps especially when it seeks to escape from their effects. The Victorian imagination – by no means confined to literary and visual art, but expressed there with astonishing richness and brio – was energized by the dizzying and disruptive pace of modernity. The threats and promises of political reform, from the abolition of slavery to the extension of the franchise, not to mention the changing and contested relations between men and women and the accelerated development of scientific knowledge all find their possibilities and drawbacks tried out as romance or fantasy, often juxtaposed with the detailed depiction of the grim conditions of work in Victorian Britain, as they are in Charles Kingsley's *Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby* (1863), but also erupting in his social novels of the late eighties, *Yeast* (1848) and *Alton Locke* (1850). Mid-century adult fiction was a mixed genre in which realism and fancy were intertwined. The alternative to dystopian futures draws longingly on the past. The fondness for medieval stories and settings in Tennyson or the Pre-Raphaelites, the idealizing of feudal society in Disraeli's fiction, draw this invented past forward, appropriating conservative social imaginary in the face of radical challenges to it in the Victorian everyday. What is 'other' can be as far away as the orient, imagined in this issue through Dickens's references to its commodities in his fiction, or as socially and emotionally distant as Disraeli's brutal assessment in *Sybil* (1844) that in Britain there were 'Two Nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets'.¹ We can see these class adversaries – and the repulsion between them – depicted in any number of literary texts. For a particularly egregious example see Elizabeth Barrett Browning's detailed, repellent description of a dehumanized and vicious urban residuum in her novel-poem *Aurora Leigh* (1855) which in part addresses class division and the condition of England that preoccupied so many politicians, writers and reformers. Visitors from other planets were not typically the other half of the nation, as Disraeli had put it, but rather elevated strangers regularly conscripted by Victorian writers as astute but dispassionate figures who can observe without prejudice the radical differences between humans they encounter. Just such

¹ Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil, or the Two Nations*, ed. by Sheila Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 65.

an alien appears in the 1840s in a popular ethnographic work by James Cowles Prichard, *The Natural History of Man* (1843), as a foil for the greater knowledge of the human scientist.

What is other need not be feared races or classes, but can also be objects of desire. Charlotte Brontë's governess, Jane Eyre, looking out from the rooftops of Thornfield over 'sequestered field and hill', wishes for a cosmopolitan rather than a provincial life; she longs for 'a power of vision' which 'might reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard about but never seen'. From Jane's perspective the 'busy world' is other and unattainable but the other world of her imagination compensates with 'a tale [...] narrated continuously; quickened with all of the incident, life, fire, feeling, that I desired and had not in my actual existence'.² The imagination does not always conjure up benign alterity: its incident, its narratives can just as often be the stuff of nightmare. This effect is not only a matter of creation but also of interpretation. At the opening of *Jane Eyre* (1847) the child Jane, looking at the illustrations of the bleak landscapes of the frozen north in Berwick's *History of British Birds*, merges its images with the often frightening stories that the servant Bessie tells her. Locked by the servants at her Aunt Reed's command in the Red Room – the master bedroom of her dead uncle – Jane sees her own reflection in the glass as absolutely other: 'half fairy, half imp' (p. 11). In the breakdown that ensues her favorite book, *Gulliver's Travels*, becomes a compendium of terror where 'the giants were gaunt goblins, the pigmies malevolent and fearful imps, Gulliver a most desolate wanderer in most dread and dangerous regions' (p. 17). Both the child Jane's prior pleasure in the ordered agrarian landscape of Lilliput, a scaled-down model of an ideal settler society, and her post-Red Room vision of a violent and adversarial colonial setting with restive, racialised natives and frightened, isolated Europeans represents both sides of Imperial alterity, a glimpse of the abyss reinforced later in the novel when Rochester describes the horrors of his Jamaican experience.

Jane Eyre is not an exceptional text for its times in its insistent evocation of frightening others, nor are the figures of malevolent imps and pygmies exclusive to Brontë's novel. Merged representations of the non-human of British fable and story and the ethnographic depictions of distant races appear as disturbing and contaminating presences in rural rather than urban space. Little leering men up to no good in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862) tempt two young sisters with exotic out of season fruit, a corrupting sign, as critics have argued, of the unnatural desires created by a global economy geared to luxury consumption. And in the early 1840's the Royal Academy painter, William Mulready, famously depicted a strange rural scene: a nervous blond boy, still in small clothes, encouraged by two women, reluctantly offers alms to two crouching, sinister looking Lascars. These quintessentially urban figures – sailors from the Indian subcontinent often stranded in

² Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 2nd Norton Critical Edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1987), p. 95. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

London and barred from employment in England – are, in Mulready’s prize-winning painting, displaced into a timeless country setting. The lessons that readers and viewers are meant to learn from these pictorial and literary encounters with racialized and/or subhuman others are complex, but from the 1840s forward their imagined presence too often signals a contraction rather than an expansion of sympathy with human difference – narratively marked by a retreat to a ‘safer’ world of racial, cultural and national affiliation. The wish to withdraw from an increasingly cosmopolitan, urbanized world to an imaginary space where menacing strangers are kept at bay is one response among many to the expansion of the British Empire and the domination of its peoples.

Commerce, industry and rapidly changing technology all inspire entry to Victorian ‘other worlds’. Old materials become transformed by new production processes, and these give rise to extraordinary and elaborate visions. In *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (2008) Isobel Armstrong explores the ‘scopic culture’ that reigned for a half century, whose material reference points were the transparent glass walls and elaborate sparkling fountain of the Crystal Palace. Yet Armstrong argues that ‘[t]he pellucid glass membrane ... inevitably generated double meanings – the artificial lustre of consumer experience *and* urban pastoral, the spectacle as visual pleasure *and* reified commodity, economic exploitation *and* communal regeneration’.³ Grazia Zaffuto in her essay in this issue explores the class tensions revealed in attempts to provide ‘visual education’ for a wider, less educated public at the Crystal Palace’s post-Exhibition site at Sydenham. She observes that ‘by placing the Fine Arts Courts, the Industrial Courts, and commercial stalls inside the glass building, the Crystal Palace Company created quite evidently, multiple meanings, alluding specifically to the tensions of being all and at the same time a trader, an educator and an entertainment provider’ (p. 13). The 1851 Exhibition itself offered a packaged glimpse of past civilizations and present ‘primitive’ societies. The Fine Arts Courts, Zaffuto suggests, were supposed to evoke very different responses from its segregated audiences – the uneducated poor or the sophisticated, knowledgeable middle and upper classes. The global sources of Britain’s commodity culture, and the products themselves, among them domestic items such as household objects, consumables or fabrics, provide the metonymic link to trading nations and adjust the relationship of Britain and Britons to them – the distance and intimacy that the possession of foreign things invoked. Hannah Lewis-Bill explores the leitmotif of China and Chinese commodities in Dickens, with special reference to *Dombey and Son* (1846) where, she argues, tea itself becomes the vehicle for the simultaneous naturalization and estrangement of its referent, safely surrounded in domestic settings with British things. The other world of the orient is only a teacup away; it matters that Britain can control even that imaginative distance.

³ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 133.

The scopic culture that Armstrong explores continues its effects into the last decades of the nineteenth century, where social and aesthetic criticism turns towards the Utopian political imaginary as an alternative to the harsh realities of industrial and commercial culture. Owen Holland, in this issue, examines the genealogy of William Morris's use of 'visual metaphors and rhetorical devices' related to sight in his utopian writings, including his 1890 novel *News from Nowhere (or an Epoch of Rest)*, tracing them from the Romantics through Carlyle, Ruskin and Arnold. For Morris, Holland argues, the 'utopian optic' is always political. A 'slight shift' in our perspective allows us to see within the present the possibilities for thinking and living otherwise, and further to imagine how this might, practically, be brought about. Holland tracks Morris's engagement with the traditions of individual and collective modes of vision through a close examination of what is often a contradictory – but fascinating – visual rhetoric.

Morris's 'Nowhere' is a 'real' place: London subtly altered as in a dreamscape, but with geographical signifiers in place – Trafalgar Square, the Thames, the Houses of Parliament. In Elizabeth Corbett's utopian novel, *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future* (1889), women live in a future Ireland, depopulated by a war which leaves it open to colonisation by the excess women of England – a fantasy, one might suggest, a bit too close for comfort to the depopulation caused by the Irish famine, and in its unstated imperialism not so far away after all from the Brontë children's African juvenilia. However, Christina Lake, in this issue, argues persuasively for the radical nature of Corbett's utopia. Freed from restrictive modes of dress and what Corbett thought of as other patriarchal impositions in Victorian England, and with reproduction guided by eugenicist and Malthusian principles, they have evolved into liberated superwomen. Lake suggests that Matthew Beaumont's description of the gap in late-nineteenth-century feminist utopias 'between the fantasy of collective social harmony [...] and the lonely individual consciousness of the woman writer' does not apply in Corbett's case,⁴ since for her the like-minded community of women already existed in the reforming feminist group associated with the *Women's Penny Paper*. Corbett, a journalist and early successful author of detective stories as well as a suffrage campaigner, was a strong believer that scientific advances could benefit women. *New Amazonia's* athletic goddesses and celibate cadre of government leaders are proof of her faith in science coupled with 'common sense'.

Morris's narrator in *News from Nowhere* wakes up in a brave new world of our own millennium, a world where work is unalienated, unpaid and pleasurable, the Thames unpolluted by industrial waste and social relations between men and women freer and more egalitarian, if not quite a paradise for feminists. Nineteen-year-old Jane Eyre's longing for the 'busy' cosmopolitan world has been replaced by an agrarian dreamscape. In the same passage Jane demands a world which recognizes

⁴ Matthew Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd.: Ideologies of Social Dreaming in England, 1870-1900* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 90.

that

women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (p. 96)

Yet in spite of this eloquent demand, still echoing down the centuries since it was first made, Jane settles for, and finds happiness with, her blind and disabled aristocrat in a remote house in the green heart of England. What she or her half Irish creator would have made Corbett's Brobdinagian Amazons in a colonized Ireland is hard to envision. Nor are we any nearer to Morris's socialist paradise. What Charles Dickens, so keen on controlling – in his fiction at least – England's commercial and cultural relations to the orient, would make of the entrepreneurial Chinese investors in Britain is even harder to conjure up. But perhaps the mid-nineteenth century backers of the Crystal Palace would be pleased (if puzzled) to know that the Chinese investment group ZhongRong has made a serious bid, welcomed by London Mayor, Boris Johnson, to build a 'new' Crystal Palace on the site of the original in South London, providing thousands of jobs and regenerating the area. ZhongRong Group chairman Ni Zhaoxing said: 'London is renowned across the world for its history and culture and the former Crystal Palace is celebrated in China as a magnificent achievement. This project is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to bring its spirit back to life by recreating the Crystal Palace and restoring the park to its former glory'.⁵ Proof, if proof were needed, that the real world will almost always outstrip the past's most radical hopes and most daring flights of fancy. If we could take utopian fiction's liberty with time and space, we might say to the Victorians: be careful what you wish for.

⁵ Anon., 'Crystal Palace £500m Rebuild Plans Unveiled', *BBC News London* <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-24375547>> [accessed 16 November 2013].

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